

**Kathleen Sullivan's
Dreams, Another Way of Knowing**

Dream to Wake Up: Dreams and Addiction

I'm desperately trying to stop my backward slide down the muddy slope. I can't seem to get a grip and continue sliding. I awake in a total panic.

For any dreamer, the theme of this dream could indicate a loss of control due to murky emotions (mud). For a recovering addict, it holds even greater significance, reflected in the word *backslide*.

Serious dreamers pay deliberate attention to the language of the dream. Thus, *backslide*, a word used in recovery programs to indicate a return to former patterns of thought and behavior, signals a clear warning. One determined to change a life-threatening pattern of addiction heeds such dreams like a string of red lights on a freeway. Putting on the brakes is definitely indicated. The dreamer in this case had been sober for three years. At the time of the dream the renewal of a romantic relationship from his past had triggered old desires to control the life of his beloved. Reflecting on the dream he realized that, if unrecognized, the need for control would end his budding relationship. That loss would severely threaten his recovery.

Another common dream for people in recovery involves steps versus elevators. *I'm waiting for an elevator. The smell is horrible because so many of these folks are filthy drunks. I imagine the smell in the enclosed space will be intolerable so I decide to take the steps even though I will have to climb many stories.* This dreamer, a 29-year old woman sober for 8 years, had stopped attending AA meetings believing her recovery unshakable. The dream drunks represented a group of coworkers in her new corporate job. "Their yuppie values and goals could get me in a great deal of trouble if I buy into them. I need to avoid getting trapped in a small upwardly mobile place (elevator) with these *smelly* folks by returning to meetings and walking the *steps* that keep me sane and sober."

Often sober addicts will dream that they are using again. Smokers buy a pack of cigarettes, alcoholics pick up a drink, cocaine users are drawn to white powder. This type of dream usually feels like a nightmare. It is often warning of a specific stressor that needs to be made conscious before the dreamer succumbs to old addictive behaviors as a coping mechanism.

Work (general busy-ness), a major addiction in our culture, is important to identify and difficult to overcome because, like food, it is everywhere. The following dream shows workaholicism as an inherited trait: *My husband and I are on vacation in Hawaii. We are feeling romantic and I'm getting excited. Suddenly I hear my mother charging and banging around in the kitchen. I scream, "Get out of here now!"* This dreamer identified her mom as a "traditional wife/mother/martyr who needed to appear busy at all

times.” Though her mother didn’t have a job outside the home, she sighed, puffed, groaned and complained about her heavy work burden 24/7. Because the dreamer had learned well from her mother, her dreams often recommended kicking that energy out of her life so that she could be passionate about life while feeling as if she was on vacation.

Learning how to cope with the ever-present problem of addiction occupies considerable dream time of those in relationship to an addict. This dream from a 22 year-old university student: *I’m trying to talk to my boyfriend about something really important. It’s like he can’t hear me or something. He just gazes off into the distance like he isn’t here. I hit him but his eyes are glazed and he’s just gone.* “I woke up so frustrated, I pounded my boyfriend in bed and yelled at him for being such a jerk.” It didn’t take long for the unhappy young woman to recognize that her boyfriend really *isn’t here*, is not connected to her, when he smokes pot. She soon recognized the impossibility of creating a vital relationship with someone is *just gone* most of the time.

Because substance abuse affects the ability to go into REM sleep, have dreams and retrieve them, active addicts are deprived of dream help. Often great support is found when the recovery process allows dreams to flow again. A male recovering from a 15 year heroin addiction was elated by a dream in which he is able to breathe under water after overcoming his panic of being submerged in a deep, foreign sea. As he relaxed in his new environment he was surrounded by beings of light. He felt a sense of peace and hope so foreign to his awake life. The images and feelings from this dream helped him throughout his difficult recovery period.

The following dream of a woman steadily gaining weight needs no interpretation: *I’m running as fast as I can down a dirt road being chased by a terrifying monster. Suddenly I trip on a tree root and fall. The monster catches me and gobbles me up. It is a huge crème-filled muffin!* Even for an addict deeply caught in denial, the healthy part of the self calls for attention in our dreams.